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THE PALLISER EXPEDITION

The year 1857 is one of the most important dates in the history of Western Canada. Indeed it may be called the birthdate of development along present lines. For thirty-five years the fur trade had been enjoying a sort of golden age. By many the idea had been industriously cultivated that our great plains and forests west of the Great Lakes were the peculiar preserves of the hunter and trapper and of little or no consequence otherwise. This was true in spite of the work of the Selkirk settlers who for forty-five years had been maintaining themselves at Red River in spite of unbelievable handicaps.

Meanwhile the Company of Gentlemen Adventurers trading into Hudson Bay had been piling up fat profits. Gradually news began to leak out that their territory was not the frozen waste it had been represented to be. The journals of Sir John Franklin and his associates and the work of such men as Paul Kane were beginning to lift the veil of ignorance and awkward questions were being asked. Why should a private company hold a monopoly of trade and rule over such a vast area?

It was proposed by some means to end those conditions. How could it best be done? One proposal seems to have been to cancel the Company's charter and erect a Crown Colony to take over a part at least of its prerogatives. But before such a drastic step should be taken the British Government wished to be sure of its ground. So an exploration expedition staffed by the best men available was determined upon. This Palliser expedition was called for its leader Captain Palliser. He himself was an engineer and he had associated with him two men of sound scientific training judged by the standards of those days. These were Dr. Hector, geologist and surgeon, and Mr. Bourgeau, a botanist of high standing.

Captain Palliser's instructions were to investigate the transportation problem east and west from Lake Superior to Red River and through the Rocky Mountains. In the second place he was to examine the country as to its fitness for settlement and natural resources, and delineate such areas as he found fit for agriculture. Records of meteorological conditions were to be made and in general what would to-day be called an economic survey was to be made.

Between two and three years were spent in the task assigned and all instructions were carried out. The journal of the expedition, a voluminous blue book, was presented to the Imperial Government, and for all the practical use made of its findings the expedition was promptly forgotten. Had Captain Palliser's conclusions been taken into account when our prairies were being settled almost every one of our unfortunate experiences could have been avoided.

The summer of 1857 was spent in getting into the country via the old fur-traders' route from Lake Superior to Red River, then across the plains by trail to Fort Carlton. The observations of the Franklin expedition were checked and careful notes were made relative to the possibility of a road being built from Fort William to Red River. This project Palliser considered financially impossible. At that time he was probably right but time saw conditions change. We need to remember that railway building was in its infancy and the revolution which a railway would produce was not appreciated. However, as the expedition worked its way westward by the Turtle Mountains, the Qu'Appelle and Saskatchewan valleys, the potential agricultural wealth amazed Palliser.

It is interesting to note in passing that a grasshopper or Rocky Mountain locust plague was encountered, also that July frosts were reported, and on August 12th frosts severe enough to stop flies.

On August 14th the water froze in the camp kettles in the Souris Valley. The expedition worked as far up the South Saskatchewan as the present town of Empress but turned back there for fear of the Blackfeet and crossed at the Albow almost south of the present city of Saskatoon, proceeding to Carlton House, the first winter base. Palliser relates a joke on his halfbreeds who, while still two days travel from Carlton, dressed up one morning expecting to make the post by noon. He, relying upon the Franklin observations, was certain of his position and knew they were still eighty miles out. He proved to be correct and ever after his men relied upon his big medicine to tell them where they were.

Fort Carlton was the winter base for 1857-8. Palliser made a trip East while Dr. Hector visited Edmonton, Lac la Biche, Lac St Anne, Pigeon Lake, and Rocky Mountain House. He notes rain at Fort Pitt on December 20th. Leaving the Saskatchewan at the mouth of Vermilion River he travelled by Whitford Lake to Edmonton. At a point about directly north of the present town of Innisfree he saw a slaughter of buffalo in a pound, and was astonished at the incredible numbers of buffalo all along the route.

He arrived at Fort Edmonton on December 30th in time for the New Year celebration. His comments make interesting reading. "The fort was palisaded and contained a population of 27 men, 18 women and 48 children, with 15 buffalo hunters away. The daily fresh meat ration was 526 lbs on a basis of 6 pounds per adult and from 2 to 4 pounds per day for children. Thirty acres were under cultivation, and a crude flour mill was operated by wind power." The local coal seams were carefully described and the fact that some had been on fire was noted. On the way to Rocky Mountain House the party started a prairie fire on January 10th. At Rocky Mountain House he met the Blackfeet and paved the way for a visit to their country the next summer. Here he met a hunter called

"the one with a thumb like a blunt arrow" who had a record of 57 moose in one season. Provisions were very scarce and for the return trip to Edmonton for 4 men and 16 dogs they had only 20 lbs of pemmican and some flour sweepings. The dogs became so hungry they had to be staked out at night to keep them from eating each other. Quite casually he remarks "I had no difficulty in mapping the river with the compass as I went along". An epidemic of influenza at Edmonton with two deaths, and the prevalence of goitre caught his attention. He found about eighty houses at Lac St Anne and duly recorded a catch of 40,000 whitefish in five days. On February 25th the temperature was +65 and on March 6th +70 with water running and the ground thawed to a depth of 6 inches. Here he engaged Peter Erasmus, and going out to Hay Lakes met the Lac St Anne hunters and engaged Gabriel Dumont and 12 men for the next summer. On March 29th the first goose arrived at Carlton House and on June 2nd the Hudson's Bay brigade set out.

The two following summers were spent in exploring the prairie country south to the boundary and the Rocky Mountain Passes. Four of these were examined - the Kananaskis, the British Kootenay, the Vermilion and the Kicking Horse. The latter was named by Dr. Hector in memory of being severely kicked by a peck-horse. Pelliser was not in favor of a road to British Columbia in British territory. // His descriptions of the prairie are especially accurate. What we have come to call the drouth area he outlined with uncanny accuracy. His description is as follows: "A projection of the American arid region intrudes into British territory and would be roughly contained by a triangle based upon the 49th parallel between 100° and 114° west with its apex at 53° north." Reference to the map verifies the accuracy of his description. But he specifically excepts the Hand Hills and the Cypress Hills from the general description. His conclusions were based upon the character of the vegetation, the condition

of the soil and his own meteorological observations.

The writer is fairly familiar with all the settled areas of Alberta, and there is scarcely a single exception to the general statement that where Palliser noted regions especially suitable for settlement, experience has shown him to be right and where he made an adverse report he was equally right. In the main he was most enthusiastic as to the possibilities of the country. The space for this article prohibits further details. To those who are interested, Palliser's Journal makes most fascinating reading and its perusal makes clear why one writer says he forever banished the thought that the country was an Arctic barren. "On the contrary", said Palliser, "Almost all the West is suitable for agricultural settlement". "The famous report which he presented changed everyone's ideas and marked the birth year of the modern west". We can only regret that when our settlement policy was being developed more attention was not paid to some details of that famous document.